Jeopardy Assessment

for the Proposed Incidental Taking Authorization
of the Blanding's Turtle

Burlington Bypass - City of Burlington
Racine County, Wisconsin

Background

In Wisconsin, Blanding's turtles have been listed as a threatened species since 1979. They were listed for several reasons including a very long maturation period (17-20 years), increased road mortality of adults--especially females, little evidence of successful recruitment, significant wetland habitat loss and habitat fragmentation. Blanding's turtles live throughout the state with the exception of the extreme north-central counties. They are most concentrated in the vast marshes along the Wisconsin River in Wood, Juneau, Adams, and Iowa Counties and along the Mississippi River. Blanding's turtles live primarily in marshes and shallow, vegetated bays of lakes, but can be found in almost any aquatic habitat including ponds, slow-moving rivers, trout streams and some northern bogs. They are semi-aquatic turtles and are known to move about regularly during the summer between various aquatic habitats and occasionally spend periods of time on land away from water. Blanding's turtles often overwinter in moving or deeper water to avoid freezing in winter but have been shown to overwinter in shallow wetlands where they are apparently buffered from freezing by a dense herbaceous grown cover and/or saturated soils. They are generally active from March to early November and breed in early spring and fall. Nesting usually begins in late May and runs through June. Females prefer to nest in well-drained sun-lit sandy soils in both natural and disturbed areas and are known to travel up to 1.5 miles from water to find suitable upland nesting sites. They typically return to the same nesting area each year.

Jeopardy Assessment

The Burlington Bypass project involves impacts to several wetland types including natural shallow marshes, dug ponds and riparian wetlands (sedge/wet meadows and shrub carr) that may serve as seasonal foraging areas and overwintering habitat for the state-threatened Blanding's turtle. In order to avoid or minimize the incidental taking of this turtle related to the proposed development, several conditions of the proposed authorization have been identified. If this authorization is provided by the department, these conditions must be implemented to reduce the likelihood of mortality to this turtle species.

Conditions of the Authorization

1. Turtle Fencing- All wetlands that will be impacted by the project that have been identified as potential Blanding's habitat must be fenced with trenched-in silt fencing to either contain turtles where removals will be required or to prevent turtles from entering and reentering all impacted wetland areas. The fencing must be maintained in proper condition per Department guidelines from mid-March of 2007 until project completion.

2. Turtle Removals- In areas where potential overwintering habitats occur, and after fencing has been installed per the above, removals of Blanding's and other turtles will occur through hoop net trapping and visual surveys. All captured turtles will be moved to suitable habitat in the immediate area but outside of the impacted areas. Termination of turtle removal efforts must be approved by the Department.

3. Permanent Turtle Barriers and Underpasses- Because the bypass will result in fragmentation of the habitat patch occupied by the turtles, permanent barriers and underpasses must be constructed to prevent turtles from accessing the new highway where migration is most likely and to prevent fragmentation of the local Blanding's turtle population. Turtle telemetry was conducted in the area to help guide where barriers and underpasses would be appropriate. Turtle expertise was also sought in defining these areas.

The barrier and underpass designs must be approved by the Department. WDOT will also be required to monitor these structures to determine their effectiveness.

If the above conditions are employed as required, the Department believes that the risk of take will be very minimal at most at this site. As such, it has determined that the proposed project will not jeopardize the continued existence or recovery of the state population of Blanding's turtles or the whole plant-animal community of which they are a part.